

FREE ★ FREE ★ FREE!

Got your attention?

BY MARGARET SUIB, ESQ.



Are you a Norwalk tenant, landlord, real estate agent, architect, developer, banker, mortgage broker, Section 8 recipient, housing provider, social service agency, condominium or cooperative association, or property management company? If so, you need to understand Fair Housing laws as they apply to you, including your rights.

How do you get that information? That's the easy part. You contact Norwalk's Fair Housing Officer and have your individual questions answered. You may also ask her to provide a free educational seminar for your office, your clients, or any Norwalk group. Topics of such training includes *fair housing*, *Connecticut landlord/tenant laws*, and *foreclosure information referrals*. The Fair Housing Officer often partners with other presenters, such as Norwalk's Fair Rent office, to make seminars "one-stop shopping" for the participants.

How much will this cost you? Absolutely nothing! Norwalk Fair Housing will provide handouts for participants and only asks you to provide the snacks, if any are to be provided.

In the first few months of 2011, training has been provided to Norwalk agencies including Norwalk Housing Authority, Family & Children's Agency, and

NEON (Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now). Training is customized for the clientele/participants. The interests of architects and developers in construction accessibility requirements differ from those of landlords concerned with sources of income, or tenants worried about being denied a housing opportunity because they have a disability or a family with children.

In prior years, training has been provided to real estate offices at their weekly staff meetings, Keystone House, at the homeless shelter and drop-in center, Malta House, for condominium and cooperative associations, for the Continuum of Care membership (social service umbrella network), to name a few. In short, all you need to do is ask. Norwalk Fair Housing will be happy to schedule a training session for your group.

Norwalk Fair Housing will soon have a web page on the City of Norwalk's website (www.norwalkct.org) — scroll down under "Departments" and click on "Fair Housing." Training available to the public (along with lots of other great Fair Housing information) will be listed there. Of course, you may also call for information at (203) 854-7820.

About the author: Margaret K. Suib, Esq., Norwalk's Fair Housing officer since 1996, is an attorney assisting residents in combating housing discrimination. msuib@norwalkct.org.

What Has Fair Housing Done for You Lately?

BY MARGARET SUIB



Norwalk's Fair Housing Officer (FHO) and Fair Housing Advisory Commission (FHAC) work in concert to address issues of housing discrimination in Norwalk. While some businesses have slowed in this down economy, we are sorry to report that cases of housing discrimination continue to rise: History shows us that often, a bad economy and increased discrimination occur together.

Norwalk's Fair Housing Officer's annual report for the FY 2010-2011 will be available in November 2011 and available to all who wish more detail. By way of summary, here's what Norwalk Fair Housing has done of late:

- 2,205 total requests for Fair Housing service including 150 inquiries regarding housing discrimination: Many concerns were resolved short of bringing a legal action.
- More Fair Housing cases than ever before — usually, four to six cases are brought to adjudication per year while this past year, 16 housing discrimination cases were prepared for filing, based upon discrimination due to disability (some physical, others mental and/or emotional), national origin, race, color, religion, familial status, domestic violence/gender, and source of income.
- In terms of outreach, education, and advocacy: The FHO estimates that she made Fair Housing presentations to in excess of 500 people, more than in any prior year. Among the groups were the local housing authority and new Section 8 participants (about four times during the year), Family & Children's Agency (two times), Bethel AME Church, NEON's head-start parent groups (two times), landlords, tenants, and others. Additional people were served through this column and the Fair Housing webpage on the City website (www.norwalkct.org).

- Fair Housing materials are provided in English and Spanish and services in French.
- The FHO and FHAC monitor housing practices (public and private) for compatibility with Fair Housing goals and objectives (eliminating discrimination, increasing integration) has regularly scheduled monthly meetings throughout the year and is made up of representatives from Connecticut Legal Services, Norwalk Branch NAACP, NEON, Norwalk Housing Authority, Norwalk Human Relations Commission, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency; and the Mayor, City of Norwalk.
- FHAC addressed areas of concern with the Norwalk Housing Authority regarding its reasonable accommodations policies and procedures, by memo and requests for meetings.
- FHAC and FHO participate in the City's "Choice Neighborhood" planning process (redevelopment of Washington Village and surrounding neighborhood) and addressed areas of concern regarding inquiries into the health/disability of residents.
- FHAC and FHO hosted/presented an annual event for community leaders, this one exploring how to self-analyze and identify impediments to Fair Housing, in the context of preparing an Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice (HUD-required document), especially considering the recent lawsuit against Westchester County, N.Y. A recognized expert, Erin Kemple, Esq., executive director of the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, was the presenter.
- FHAC and FHO attend and comment on Norwalk's Transit Oriented Development planning meetings and raise Fair Housing issues, especially the potential displacement of residents.

Want more details? Contact Norwalk's Fair Housing Officer at 203.854.7820 or msuib@norwalkct.org.

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Affordable Housing: A Component of Fair Housing?

BY MARGARET SUIB



A number of years ago, Norwalk's Fair Housing officer was quoted in this newspaper as saying that "affordable housing" in Norwalk is an oxymoron. Perhaps that's an overstatement. But recently available data, including 2010 census data, confirms that the need for affordable

housing in Norwalk continues to rise at a rate much greater than the supply. How does that relate to fair housing? Fair housing and affordable housing are inextricably linked: you can't have fair without affordable.

In 2008, the state counted 3,840 affordable units in Norwalk, which was estimated to be 11.38% of Norwalk's housing stock. In 2010, we counted 3,839 affordable units. In 2011, Norwalk estimates the number of affordable housing units to be 3,861. But what percentage is that now?

In order to calculate the percentage, you need to know the total number of housing units (the denominator in the equation). That number is only provided every 10 years, from the Census. We've been waiting for that number since 2000. We wait no more.

According to 2010 census data, we know that the total number of housing units in Norwalk in 2010 was 35,415 (up from 33,753 in 2000, an increase of 1,662 housing units). If we have 3,861 affordable units today, the percentage of affordable units in Norwalk has dropped to approximately 10.9%

If 10.9% of Norwalk's housing units is now considered "affordable," down from estimates of more than 11%, there's been a significant drop at a time when more, not less, affordable housing is needed.

Local Fair Housing Case Settled at State Level

A Norwalk case filed with the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities in October 2010 has been settled for more than \$39,000.

The case involved a complaint by a disabled Norwalk woman who sought appropriate parking accommodations at her residence in compliance with state law. In addition to the monetary settlement and various other waivers, the settlement includes an assigned parking spot for the woman. The settlement also included that the defendant — a Norwalk company — would get two hours of Fair Housing training. The cost of that training has been included in the Fair Housing Advisory Commission's budget.

How do we quantify our need for affordable housing? A report called "Out of Reach," published annually by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, measures that need. It defines "affordable" as paying no more than 30% of household income on housing cost. The 2011 "Out of Reach" report indicates that in Norwalk, nearly 50% of owners and more than 57% of renters are "cost burdened," meaning they are paying more than 30% of their income on housing.

We are left with an important question: are we aiming at the floor, the minimum required by the state statute, meaning that ten (10%) percent of Norwalk's housing stock is "affordable" which then allows Norwalk to retain significant zoning control over the development of affordable housing? Or are we setting our sights higher than the floor, looking to meet the affordable housing need of Norwalkers? The two concepts are not the same and should not be confused. That is a discussion item for advocates and a decision for policy makers. ■

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